

# The Power of Walking Meetings

Thinking, talking, and walking are inextricably linked through history. It is only a recent idea that we meet around tables, seated in chairs. We want to help you rediscover and share the value of walking meetings.



Aristotle was said to walk as he taught, founding what we now refer to as Ancient Greece's Peripatetic School of philosophy. This name was derived from the colonnade or walkway in the Lyceum in which he taught. The Sophists, philosophers predating Socrates, were wanderers. They traveled place to place on foot delivering talks.

The link between deliberation and walking recurs in philosophy, literature and poetry. In central Europe, Hegel walked, as did Kant, Kierkegaard and poets such as Wordsworth.

Walking inspired the productivity of these great people and it can benefit you.

## Walking meetings offer:

- Physical activity that fits into the day.
- Energized and more alert participants.
- Different environments to inspire new ideas.
- Time outdoors, in nature, and with fresh air and light.
- Improved physical and mental well-being.
- Walking and talking side by side cuts through hierarchal and status distinctions and sets people at ease.
- Enhanced relationship building.
- Creativity and new solutions.
- If the group is larger, several conversations happen at the same time and people can move around easily to talk to others in the group.
- Enhanced group identity, and strengthened team spirit.
- Meetings that no longer feel like a waste of time.
- Process as helpful as product.
- Utilitarian purposes can be added, such as fitting in errands.



*Gathering as a group.*

# Purposes of Meetings

1. Educate, inform
2. Problem solve
3. Enhance creativity
4. Socialize, build team spirit
5. Make decisions
6. Resolve conflict

## **WALKING MEETINGS HAVE SPECIAL ADVANTAGES FOR EACH OF THESE:**

1. Educate about things in the environment while experiencing and demonstrating them. Different experts/teachers can speak at different locations.
2. Problem solving can be enhanced by the physical activity of walking (“thinking on your feet”), as well as informal interactions among people.
3. Creativity is enhanced when people are physically active, and stimulated by variety in events and visual, auditory, and other senses.
4. Relationships are developed while walking, and team building occurs while involved in informal activities. The spontaneous mixing that occurs on a walk can enhance interactions.
5. Walking meetings help prepare for decision-making—they can result in more options for consideration.
6. Walks can help resolve conflicts for pairs and small groups. For larger groups the walk improves team interactions and helps generate solutions.

# Who the meeting is with

## *Size*

### **ONE ON ONE MEETINGS**

Meeting as a pair tends to be easy. Walking breaks down the barrier of a desk and chair, and lets people communicate more equally.

### **SMALL GROUP MEETINGS (3-5)**

Meetings with 3 or more can be affected by the width of the sidewalk or path, and variations and barriers. The discussion can occur while walking, or if desired the group can stop along the walk.

### **GETTING BIGGER ( 6-15 PEOPLE)**

Meetings with larger groups tend to result in more than one conversation while walking. If the whole group is to be involved, make time to stop and gather as a whole.

### **LARGER GROUPS (15-50 PEOPLE)**

These tend to require more planning, with a strong leader and several assistants. There will be conversations while walking, then planned stops for presentations.

## *Age/Ability/Interest*

Age impacts—children can become restless if the group moves slowly or stops often. For walkers of differing abilities, some adjustment in speed may be necessary. Participants may have different goals for the meeting, with some wanting to have a more vigorous walk.

If elected officials or other VIP's are involved, mixing results in more people having access to them.

## *Speakers*

For informative meetings, invite speakers, such as people from the neighborhood to talk about neighborhood issues, business leaders, elected officials, and experts.

## *Participants*

To get more participants, publicize the meeting—newspapers, neighborhood newsletters, fliers, emails.

## Where to have the meeting

- Natural settings such as parks or trails.
- Urban settings, such as sidewalks, are both stimulating and convenient.
- Indoors is possible given large enough hallways or spacious areas like convention centers or malls.
- Attention to the route is important—avoid noisy roads.
- Determine the start location, course, and finish location. The starting point can be a gathering place such as a coffee shop, school, or just an outdoor spot. The course can be set ahead of time for larger groups, or can be more spontaneous for smaller groups. Returning to the start is easiest, especially if people have driven, but it is possible to finish elsewhere if people are using transit, walking, or carpooling.



*Rain does not have to stop you.*

## When is the meeting?

### *Season*

Winters in some locations can be challenging, but advising umbrellas and rain and/or snow gear helps. You can even meet in a downpour! —but more time indoors before and after is wise.

### *Day of the week*

This varies depending on the participants and purpose.

### *Time of day*

Afternoon can help revive dwindling energy. Evening walks are possible seasonally or if there is enough street lighting.

## **Planning Suggestions**

### *Determine Course*

- For very small groups, you can be more spontaneous in deciding where to go. With more people, determine a comfortable place to gather such as a coffee shop, restaurant or covered area.
- Determine whether the walk will return to the start, and if not, how people will be able to get transportation. Estimate the time and how to adjust the walk to fit the allotted time.

### *Roles: Leadership/Recording*

- A leader/organizer is not needed for smaller groups. For large groups, a leader is necessary, and possibly assistants.
- If there is need to record the discussion or decisions, designate a note-taker who can use a small notebook or recorder.

### *Process*

- Discussion in small groups can occur simply while walking.
- With larger groups, the gathering time can be used to let people get to know each other, and to preview the goals and course of the walk. Because people will be involved in multiple conversations while walking, plan to have stopping points to gather periodically. This can be a time to focus on something in the environment, or to have a speaker.

### *Evaluation*

- Ask for verbal feedback or use a simple questionnaire.

## Suggestions for Dealing with Challenges

- **NOISE.** For small group meetings, some ambient noise can actually increase the privacy of the meeting. For large meetings in areas with high levels of ambient noise, you can rent a bullhorn to enable speakers to be heard clearly.
- **CELL PHONES.** Ask people to turn off cell phones before the meeting, because people often feel even less inhibited taking a call during a meeting held out of doors.



*Sometimes bystanders may show interest.*

- **NARROW WALKWAYS.** Think about a route or loop that accommodates the size of your group. Larger groups often will prefer to do most of the conversing at specific points in the walk which enable the group to gather together.
- **UNANTICIPATED DISTRACTIONS** can appear—weaving them into the discussion is helpful.
- **DIVERSITY OF WALKING PACES.** Splitting the group into slower and faster groups can address this concern.
- **FOLLOWING AN AGENDA.** Include stops to punctuate the meeting, with each stop representing the transition from one topic in the agenda to another.

## Examples of walking meetings:

### *Two people:*

#### **WALKS WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY MEMBERS**

Walking with a good friend is a way to fit in physical activity and good conversation.

It is enjoyable to walk with one's spouse either for exercise or to destinations and to talk along the way. Walking with teenagers can be an easy way to improve conversation as the side to side process is less inhibiting.

#### **ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS AT WORK**

Meetings with supervisors can be done while walking, as well as those with coworkers.

### *Small Group meetings (3-5 people):*

#### **FAMILY MEETINGS**

Many families meet around a table. Why not take the show on the road and talk about family plans while on a walk through the neighborhood or nearby park? It can be a good chance to share time together without the stifling posture of the dinner table.

#### **WALKING WHILE PLANNING**

When planning an event a walking meeting can be a way to build new relationships as well as generate ideas.

### *Getting Bigger (6-15 people):*

#### **WALK TO WORK WITH YOUR POLITICIAN**

This can start with a casual gathering in the beginning and at the end. During the walk, it is helpful to mix so different people have access to the elected official.

#### **NEIGHBORHOOD MEETING**

A small group can gather in a coffee shop to talk, and then neighborhood residents lead the walk along their favorite route.



*Congressman Jim McDermott likes to hold one-on-one meetings on walks.*

## *Larger groups (16 and more people):*

### **WALK WITH THE MAYOR**

A group of community members, city employees and the Mayor can gather for speeches at the start. Then the Mayor and citizens walk through the neighborhood and discuss community needs.

### **NEIGHBORHOOD TOUR**

This can start in front of an elementary school, with one leader for a large group, and several assistants. Then tour the neighborhood, with the leader stopping the group often for comments on the environment. Ideally there will be a lot of mingling during the walk.

### **WALKING DISCUSSION**

This can bring together a large group with elected officials, government employees, neighborhood activists, and community members. At the beginning and during several stops along the walk, speakers can present on their topic of expertise.

### **WALKING DEBATE**

This is similar to the discussion, but at each stop a different speaker presents their point of view.



*Sitting for more involved presentations is an option.*

## **Other Examples:**

### *Walking Town Meetings*

**ARLINGTON, VA**

<http://www.arlingtonva.us/departments/CountyBoard/townmeetings/CountyBoardTownmeetingsMain.aspx>

**ROCKVILLE, MD**

<http://www.rockvillemd.gov/residents/ncs/neighborhood.htm>

**CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND**

<http://www.livingstreets.org.nz/CCCaimsprogress.htm>

### *Businesses*

[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0FXS/is\\_11\\_79/ai\\_67317556](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FXS/is_11_79/ai_67317556)



*Conversation groups.*

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Solnit, Rebecca. Wanderlust, Viking: 2000.

Feet First is a pedestrian advocacy organization in Washington State. Our mission is to promote the rights and interests of pedestrians and to encourage walking. We have been conducting walking meetings since 2001. We started this to re-energize our group and as an alternative to indoor meetings that seemed to sap our energy. We started with members leading walks in their neighborhoods, and now have progressed to “Traffic Tamer Tours” of neighborhoods throughout the region.

This booklet is currently in draft form. Comments and suggestions will help us successfully communicate the benefits of walking meetings to a broader audience.

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